



How Bush Was "Churchilled" in Iraq

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Rather than the cakewalk assault allegedly promised by Iraqi exiles and echoed in Pentagon circles on the "central front in the War on Terror," increasingly Iraq appears to have become a distracting detour into a debilitating sideshow war. It may have been, as Walter Russell Mead argues, that the invasion of Iraq was a good case badly made by the Bush administration. Since it took office, the Bush administration has argued that the United States should return to strategies of preemption, unilateralism and hegemony that characterized American national security strategy in the nineteenth century, rather than rely on the passé Cold War doctrines of containment and deterrence.[1] These strategies offer an offensive posture that signals to potential terrorists, and their state sponsors, that they face a first strike or subsequent retaliation from overwhelming U.S. power anywhere in the world. The logic for such a strategy seems infallible: "Therapy will not work on these kinds of people," the American President declared of terrorists. "Treaties make no sense. There's only one thing: Get them before they get us, stay on the offensive." Furthermore, the weapons of mass destruction (WMD) available to the West's enemies make a strategy of retaliation for violence done a luxury that no nation, least of all the United States, can afford. The ways of deliberative multilateral consultation are out of date, even dangerous. The U.S. message is that, "old-fashioned power politics in an era of weapons of mass destruction is a sure road to ruin," writes Mead.[2] Furthermore, preemption, the Siamese twin of unilateralism, is as American as apple pie.

In the case of Iraq, Mead argues that Clinton's strategy of containment of Saddam was gradually poisoning and destabilizing the region, especially Saudi Arabia; that UN sanctions were being circumvented, creating a humanitarian crisis, and driving up oil prices; and that Saddam could re-ignite a crisis whenever he wished demanded a more aggressive response.[3] But in May 2004, former commander of U.S. Central Command General (ret'd.) Anthony Zinni argued that, compared to the strategic nightmare delivered by "preemption", containment appears positively idyllic. "The first mistake that will be recorded by history," Zinni argued of the Iraq War of 2003, will be "the belief that containment as a policy doesn't work." Containment required only a floating force that averaged 23,000 personnel at any one time, paid for in large measure by regional allies. "Never once when we decided to take action against Saddam, when he violated the sanctions, or the rules by which the inspectors operated under, never once were we denied permission to use bases, or airspace, or to strike from those places. We built a wonderful coalition, without any formal treaties, without any particular arrangement." Even had Saddam retained WMD, these weapons would have been in a state of rapid deterioration, and would have been undeployable in any case because of total coalition dominance of the air.[4]

So, if containment was not working, how do we now rate the success of "preemption"? The simple truth is that the decision to topple Saddam Hussein has roiled the Middle East, forged

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disparate elements opposed to the U.S. presence into a coherent resistance, and handed it an asymmetric advantage on an urban battlefield where resisters can compete successfully against conventionally superior U.S. forces. Retired U.S. army General William Odom wants out of Iraq, and he is correct. The Western alliance has been seriously damaged and American manpower dangerously overstretched by an ill-advised foray into a marginal adventure. We are embroiled in a debilitating insurgency that has undermined our original optimism, and increasingly threatens to sabotage our goals for invasion by making Iraq prom night for terrorists. If potentially more important "fronts" explode, we'll be in serious trouble.

Even without mentioning the "V" word, history is replete with examples of wartime leaders who authorized incursions into peripheral theaters to bolster allies (our friends in the Middle East), demolish soft targets and collect cheap victories (we would be greeted as liberators by a grateful Iraqi people), pre-empt threats real and imagined (WMD and Saddam's links to terrorism), and harvest strategic payoffs on the margins (push the dynamic of the Middle East toward democratic reform and resolution of the Israel-Palestinian problem). Unfortunately, history also suggests that when powerful countries become mired in strategic diversions, they overextend themselves and become vulnerable to threats on other "fronts."

Athens' decision to attack Syracuse in 415 to preempt alleged Spartan influence in Sicily initiated the Athenian slide to defeat in the Peloponnesian War. Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1808 ignited the "Peninsular War" that cost him, by his own reckoning, a hundred men a day. Churchill's vision of a quick victory against Turkey in 1915 that would roll up the Central Powers' Balkan flank and open Russia to re-supply led straight to the dead-end Gallipoli campaign. However, in the next war, Churchill turned the tables on his Axis enemies by tempting Hitler into the cul-de-sac of the Mediterranean.

In August 1940, Great Britain appeared to be on the ropes, flushed from the Continent and fighting a desperate air war over the home islands, a softening overture, most assumed, to a German invasion. At this moment of national peril, Winston Churchill ordered his Middle East commander, General Sir Archibald Wavell, to go on the offensive against the Italians in the Mediterranean and East Africa. British success goaded Hitler to dispatch General Erwin Rommel to aid his beleaguered Axis ally in North Africa, accelerated the Fuhrer's decision to pre-empt Soviet and British mischief in the Balkans, and secure his Mediterranean flank in preparation for Barbarossa, the June 1941 invasion of the Soviet Union.

In the end, Hitler's decision to slide into the Mediterranean met none of his goals. German strength was gradually sapped as its allies were peeled away and the once terrorizing operational and tactical superiority of German forces blunted. Rather than preempt British influence, Hitler's invasion of the Balkans and Greece toppled governments who had hitherto proven extremely reluctant to provoke Germany. In fact, Hitler's practically casualty-free invasion of Yugoslavia and Greece lit a match in the gas factory of volatile Balkan politics that eventually forced him to commit twenty divisions to fight tenacious insurgencies that the Allies could stoke with a modest investment of advisors, weapons and cash.

Finally, far from securing his southern flank, Hitler's Mediterranean incursion offered Churchill a way back into a war that, in 1940, seemed all but lost. It allowed Churchill to apply his strength—the Royal Navy—against Hitler's formidable high-tech *Wehrmacht*. Erwin Rommel's stunning tactical victories in the Western Desert in 1941 and the first half of 1942 failed to add up to strategic success. In the end, Hitler's decision to invade the Mediterranean committed up to fifty German divisions to strategically barren campaigns in a maritime theater that presented it with operational and tactical challenges that it was poorly configured to counter. Churchill used the time to court his American ally, build up his forces, and prepare for a return to Northern Europe in June 1944.

Fallujah, Najaf, and other "pockets" of Iraqi resistance, together with prisoner abuse scandals, offer a wake-up call that we have been "Churchilled" in Iraq where coalition vulnerabilities - fragile

alliance support for our goals, an insurgent challenge that daily gains momentum in Iraq and in the Middle East generally, and an operational environment in which an elusive enemy offers few targets for our technologically sophisticated military to attack without inflicting unacceptable collateral damage - have been exposed. The "shock and awe" that was supposed to provide the Wilsonian "momentum change" to drive authoritarian Middle Eastern regimes toward democratic reform and accommodation with Israel has been frittered away in what *Wall Street Journal* contributing editor Mark Helprin calls "a campaign of bare sufficiency" that has "taught the Arabs that we could be effectively opposed."^[5] In short, we have passed what Clausewitz would call the "culminating point of victory" in Iraq. And the longer we stay, the worse it will get, especially if other "fronts" explode—WMD proliferation in Iran and North Korea, the danger of the implosion of Pakistan, or, to paraphrase Bismarck, "some damned thing in the Taiwan Strait."

Throwing good money after bad in Iraq becomes a test of sanity rather than of mettle. The momentum of democratic change in the Middle East appears to have swung against us—the scandal at Abu Ghraib prison, which now seem more extensive than first thought,^[6] has hampered our ability to claim the moral high ground, while allowing the insurgency plausibly to proclaim their attacks as a just response to a brutal occupation. No democratic Baghdad government with a U.S. imprimatur can hope to endure. To persist in a failed strategy will invite coalition defections, further radicalize the region, undermine our few remaining Middle Eastern allies, drain U.S. coffers, cost military casualties, and possibly damage irreparably U.S. civil-military relations.

Athens, after all, should have pulled out of Sicily in 415 as soon as it realized that its ally Egesta had lured it into an unprofitable venture. Instead, it reinforced failure and forfeited its entire army two years later. Napoleon should have withdrawn to the Pyrenees as soon as he understood that the combination of a Spanish insurgency and a British force under Sir Arthur Wellesley offered an unbeatable military challenge, even for the vaunted French army. In 1915, Churchill underestimated the galvanizing effect that the Allied invasion would have on Turkish nationalism. But it took a year for the Allies to extricate their forces. In September 1943, after the Allies conquered Sicily and prepared to invade the Italian mainland, Hitler dismissed Rommel's advice that he withdraw to the Alps. Had he done so, he could have economized precious divisions for more pressing tasks.

It may be that the President's 24 May speech at the Army War College points the way to an exit strategy. If so, it will be high time, as neither the UN nor NATO appear eager to assume responsibility for a terribly bungled operation.^[7] Of course, this is a strategy of *pis aller*, disengagement through the surrender of authority to ethnic separatists, clan militias, religious fanatics and ex-Saddam loyalists. In the short run, it will raise the prestige of the Islamicists. But insurgents in Fallujah are already overflowing with boastfulness. Retreat will undoubtedly allow Iran undue influence among Iraq's majority Shias. But given the wishful thinking and bullying diplomacy that ruled the run-up to the Iraq war, a strategic readjustment is imperative. To remain is to commit ourselves to a lengthy counter-insurgency. It is difficult to see how any government propped up by U.S. bayonets can survive, and we may well ask us to leave in any case, as soon as the new Iraqi regime is sufficiently "sovereign."^[8] The invasion and occupation of Iraq has only bolstered the case of the fundamentalists, and our continued presence only undermines our Muslim allies. If more important "fronts" explode, we'll be in serious trouble.

What should our strategic readjustment look like? Begin with the abandonment of unilateralism, to include a cessation of Washington's Axis-like insistence that the national interests of its allies be ruthlessly subordinated to our own. NATO should continue its reorientation into an alliance capable of "out-of-area" operations, with U.S.-German cooperation at its core. Iraq should have made it clear that the "War on Terror" cannot be won with high-tech gadgetry alone—"military transformation," which so far has aimed to keep the technological lead over a hypothetical "peer competitor," and intimidate enemies and potential enemies into quiescence has been exposed as what British military historian Michael Howard has called the "Blitzkrieg fallacy." Technology, no

matter how overpowering, cannot eradicate political uncertainty. Rather, "military transformation" combined with a more multilateral foreign policy that legitimizes American and "Western" goals in the Middle East, should aim to create joint and combined forces, to include civil affairs and military police, able to undertake security building missions. In this way, the Western alliance, focused on the inter-related challenges of failed states, WMD proliferation, terrorism and international criminal activity, armed with common approach to deal with it, and a force structure able to apply a political-military strategy, can return to the offensive with a better hope of success.

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